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ABSTRACT

This theme issue presents an overview of alternative high schools that serve at-risk students. It opens with an essay on "Learning from the Margins," offering insights on the need for alternative schools, definitions of what constitutes an alternative school, how such schools succeed, and how alternative schools use new ideas to reach students. Four schools are profiled: Mat-Su, a school north of Anchorage, Alaska, which accepts students between the ages of 15 and 21 who are considered at-risk; Portland Night High School (Oregon), which helps students complete their secondary education even if they have already started a job or a family; the Open Meadow Learning Center, a private high school in Portland (Oregon) that uses relationship-based learning to teach life-skills development, preemployment training, peer-advocate groups, and other skills; and Meridian Academy near Boise, Idaho, a small alternative school that emphasizes the importance of each student and fosters a family-like atmosphere. Each profile features information on teaching strategies, the unique approach each school takes to meet the needs of its students, and other alternative school techniques. (RJM)

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ED 422 634

NW EDUCATION

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS: CARING FOR KIDS ON THE EDGE

NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY

SUMMER 1998

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Square Pegs in A Round World

In the popular movie Benny and Joon, Johnny Depp plays an unusual young man. "Sam" can impersonate Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and other legends of the silent screen. He's a walking encyclopedia of film lore.

But filling out a job application is a challenge because he can barely read or write. My favorite scene shows Sam at his brilliant best, doing a mime routine that attracts an audience of admirers in a city park. When he finishes to a round of applause, an onlooker asks if Sam attended a special school to learn such wonderful performance skills. Sam looks surprised by the question. Oh, no, he says. "I got kicked out of school for doing stuff like that."

Too bad Sam's options were so limited. Today, a growing number of alternative school programs provide choices to students who, for a variety of reasons, feel as if they don't "fit" in mainstream schools. If placed in more traditional classrooms, they can wind up like the eccentric Sam: square pegs in a round world. Some grow disillusioned with school and drop out. Others get angry and disruptive. If they can find the right setting, however, these same students can often make academic and behavioral strides that amaze their teachers—and themselves.

In this issue of Northwest Education, we hear from researchers who are excited about the results and innovations coming from alternative programs across the country. We trace where the alternative movement came from, look at the educational philosophies behind today's alternative schools, and show how these small programs are pioneering big changes in education.

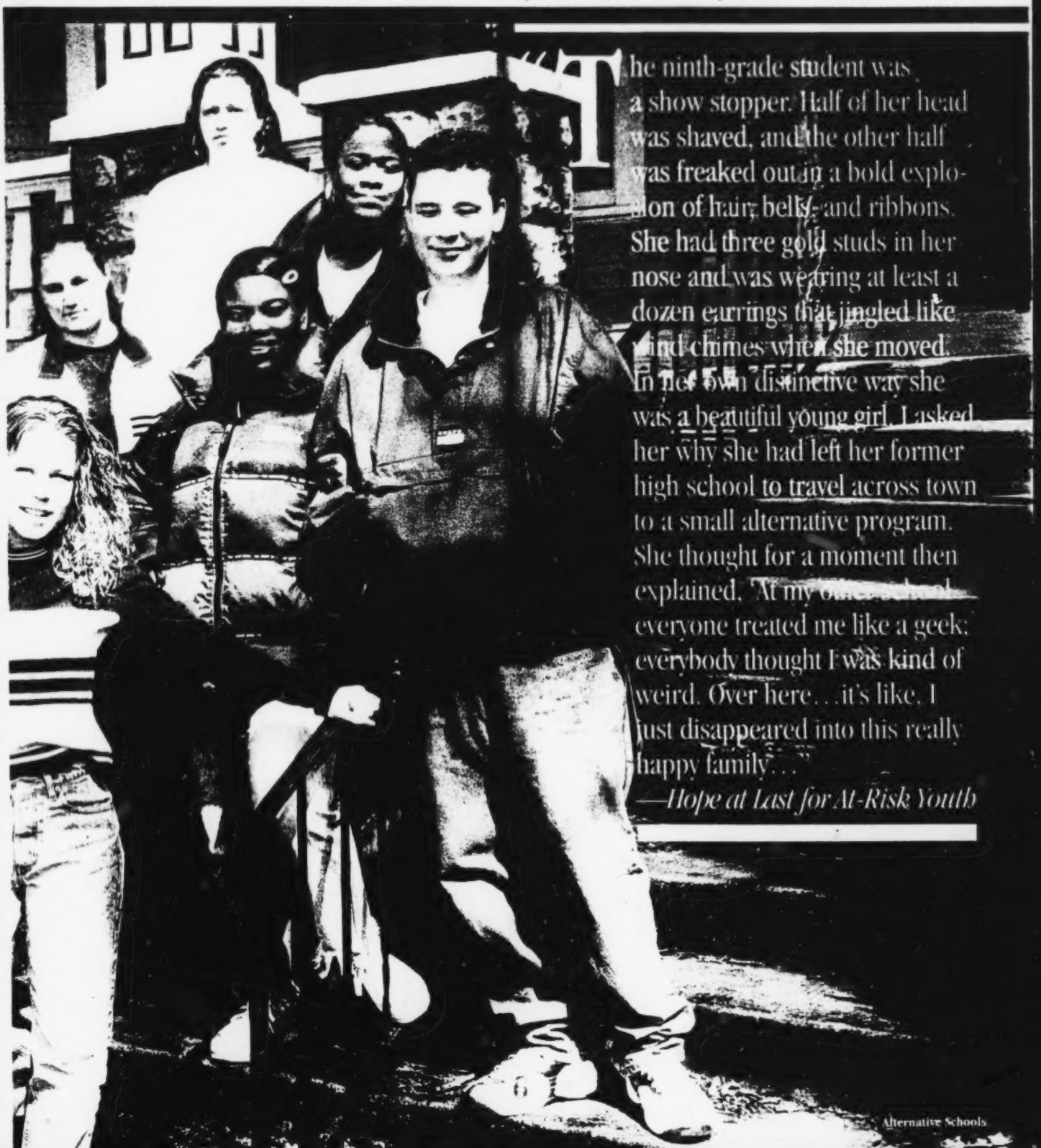
We also explore some of the complex social issues that have created such demand for these programs. As one teacher said about her students: "The stories these kids tell can move a stranger to tears." Some have been squeezed by poverty, hurt by violence, forced to grow up too fast because of teen pregnancy. Others have simply grown bored by a curriculum that doesn't touch their lives.

We'll walk you through several classrooms in the Northwest to show you how these programs work. You'll meet the teachers who thrive on working with students others have found too hard to reach. And you'll meet several graduates of these innovative schools. Shined and polished by programs and people who wouldn't let them fail, they put a human face on the population so often labeled "at risk."

— *Suzie Boss*

Learning From the Margins

By SUZIE BOSS • Photo by Rick Stier



The ninth-grade student was a show stopper. Half of her head was shaved, and the other half was freaked out in a bold explosion of hair, bells, and ribbons. She had three gold studs in her nose and was wearing at least a dozen earrings that jingled like wind chimes when she moved. In her own distinctive way she was a beautiful young girl. I asked her why she had left her former high school to travel across town to a small alternative program. She thought for a moment then explained, "At my [illegible] everyone treated me like a geek; everybody thought I was kind of weird. Over here . . . it's like, I just disappeared into this really happy family. . . ."

—*Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth*

Students attending the nation's estimated 15,000 alternative schools come in all sorts of colorful packages. More than a few adopt hairstyles, wardrobes, street language, and attitudes that would make them stand out—or be kicked out—of mainstream classrooms. But what's most remarkable about this diverse student body isn't outward appearances. It's that these students, many of whom face obstacles ranging from poverty to teen pregnancy to long-term academic failure to chronic delinquency, ..e making an appearance in school at all.

A growing body of research and years of anecdotal evidence show that students who have been labeled failures, troublemakers, or dropouts in traditional schools can thrive in smaller, more individualized settings. That may sound like plain common sense to any teacher who has worked to pull a struggling student back from the brink. It's especially timely news, however, as communities across the country wrestle with the staggering social and economic costs associated with undereducated youth. After years of operating on the margins of public education, alternative schools are getting a serious look from many different interest groups: proponents of school reform, corrections workers overwhelmed by juvenile caseloads, and employers concerned about finding enough educated young people to fill tomorrow's workplaces.

Robert D. Barr of Boise State University and William H. Parrett of the University of Alaska Fairbanks took a comprehensive look at the mounting body of research literature regarding at-risk students, much of it generated at alternative schools in the Northwest. Their detailed findings, published in *Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth*, help explain why these diverse schools are earning such widespread attention. As the authors explain, "Once at-risk students leave the difficult world of traditional school classes and enter the supportive, focused programs of an alternative school, truly remarkable achievement often occurs."

Mary Anne Raywid of the Center for the Study of Education Alternatives has witnessed hundreds of similar success stories over the years. In her research review in *The Handbook of Alternative Education* she writes, "Alternative schools are known for the dramatic turnarounds they often bring to the lives of individual youngsters whose previous school performance has ranged from poor to disastrous. Well-substantiated evidence is harder to come by," Raywid adds, "but gradually the hard evidence is piling up."

That hard evidence includes studies showing improvements in academic performance and self-esteem, and reductions in behavior problems and dropout rates, among students in alternative settings. These schools can't work wonders in every difficult case, of course. Nor can schools alone untangle the web of social and economic problems that put so many children in jeopardy. But the results coming from alternative settings are convincing. Barr and Parrett go so far as to argue that alternative schools should be a key component of "a blueprint to restructure public education" so that all students will have a fighting chance to succeed in school.

Many of the current buzzwords of school reform—performance-based education, school choice, school-to-work transition, experiential learning—have long been realities at alternative schools in the Northwest and across the country. Now, with an explosion of interest in these program, it's worth investigating what the margins can teach to the mainstream.

WHO NEEDS AN ALTERNATIVE?

At least a quarter of the students who entered the nation's high schools as freshmen in 1994 never got the chance, four years later, to don a cap and gown. Before they could march across the stage to receive their diplomas, they either dropped out, or were

pushed out, of public schools ill equipped to cope with such wrenching problems as family dysfunction, domestic violence, poverty, and homelessness. Dropout rates run even higher in urban areas where these issues are most acute, according to *Staying in School: Partnerships for Educational Change*.

What happens to the kids who disappear from the educational system? Statistics paint a grim picture. More than 80 percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts; teen parents who have two or more children can expect to remain on welfare for a decade. According to a 1997 Juvenile Justice Bulletin ("Reaching Out to Youth Out of the Education Mainstream"), "Research has demonstrated that youth who are not in school and not in the labor force are at high risk of delinquency and crime. Society pays a high price for children's school failure. In 1993, one-fourth of youth entering adult prisons had completed grade 10; only 2 percent had completed high school or had a GED."

After a decade of study, researchers can chart the characteristics of students most at risk of school failure. According to the *Staying in School* report, "Black, Latino and less-affluent Americans of all ethnic groups and nationalities drop out at far higher rates than members of other groups, especially in the inner-cities."

Studies also show that students are more likely to leave school early if they have a history of poor academic performance or low attendance; if they are older than their peers by the eighth grade (often due to retention); if they become pregnant during high school; or if they need to work to support their families.

Barr and Parrett add, "Research clearly indicates that many school attempts to help at-risk students (including retention, expulsion, and ability tracking) too often backfire and become contributing factors toward forcing students out of school."

Dale Mann, writing in *Teachers College Record*, describes a "collision of factors" leading to an individual student's decision to leave school: "Most students quit because of the compounded impact of, for example, being poor, growing up in a broken home, being held back in the fourth grade, and finally having slugged 'Mr. Fairlee,' the school's legendary vice principal for enforcement." As Mann points out, school-related factors are often only part of this complicated picture.

Much of the research on at-risk youth has focused on the problems these students face at the time they leave school. But often, their academic challenges begin years earlier, even before they start school. *Ready to Learn*, a 1991 study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, reported that more than one in three kindergartners arrive at school unprepared and poorly equipped to learn. "If children do not have a good beginning," the study cautioned, "it will be difficult, if not impossible, to compensate fully for such failings later on."

After years of watching a steady percentage of their students fail to become engaged in learning, educators have become adept at predicting which kids will be lost from the system. "Using only a few identified factors, schools can predict with better than 80 percent accuracy students in the third grade who will later drop out of school, Barr and Parrett report. Subjective factors, they add, are often as telling as hard data: "Regardless of what others might call them, teachers have always known these kids. They have known them as disinterested and disruptive, as those students who refused to learn, and as those who they thought could not learn. And they have known these students as those who, by their presence, have made teaching and learning so difficult for all the rest." According to Public Agenda, 88 percent of teachers nationwide believe academic achievement would improve substantially if persistent troublemakers were simply removed from class.

Every student who leaves the system early, either by choice or as punishment, loses much more than a diploma. These young people "are being disconnected from the functions of society," argues Fred Newman, director of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools at the University of Wisconsin. "Not just from economic productivity," he adds, "but from the functions of citizens in a democracy."

Because the costs of losing touch with at-risk students are so profound, many states have passed legislation allowing alternatives. Oregon law goes so far as to require districts to provide educational alternatives for students who either are not meeting, or are exceeding, educational standards. Some Oregon districts contract with private schools to provide alternatives while others create their own, unique programs. In Washington, where the state actively encourages and supports alternative education, the number of alternative schools expanded from 44 schools in the mid-1970s to more than 180 in 1995.

WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL?

Alternative schools have long been defined by what they are not: Not in the educational mainstream. Geared for students not succeeding in traditional classroom settings. Not bound by the conventional rules and regulations regarding textbooks, class size, curriculum, grades, teaching styles. But what are they, exactly?

There is no simple answer. An alternative "cyberschool" in California delivers individual instruction via home computers to high school students who range from gifted to slow learners. In Connecticut, an adventure curriculum is built around rock climbing and other forms of outdoor education designed to build students' self-esteem. Students in a Foxfire program in New England conduct oral history interviews in the community to learn how local folktales reflect their culture.

In the Northwest, alternative programs are similarly marked by innovation and variety. Students interested in real-world education can gain experience at jobsites in the community while developing their own "master skills" (such as reasoning, problem solving, and communications skills) through a program called CE2. First developed in Tigard, Ore., CE2 has been adopted in dozens of other communities. In rural Idaho, an alternative school serves students in grades K-12 with small classes, a schoolwide focus on technology, and outdoor learning experiences in which older students act as counselors for their younger classmates.

Clearly, programs labeled "alternative" cover a varied map. While they are diverse in organization, teaching style, and curriculum, many of today's alternative schools can trace their roots to the free schools or community schools founded during the 1960s. Richard Neuman, writing in *Phi Beta Kappan*, describes the early alternative schools as springing from an idealistic, counterculture era when the progressive educational ideas of John Dewey enjoyed a resurgence of popularity.

The early free schools shared a general belief that education should be tailored to students' needs and interests, Neuman recounts. "Consequently, alternative programs attempted to blend academic subjects with practical areas of knowledge and personal interest. They offered individual learning plans for each student. Students developed their personal learning plans and made curricular decisions. Faculty acted as partners, collaborating in development and operation of their school." Unlike more traditional schools, these institutions avoided tracking, ability grouping, and other forms of labeling.

Many of these ideas have endured as alternative schools have evolved. Today, educational alternatives include a smorgasbord of private and public programs, each one with a distinct flavor. What they con-

tinue to share, according to Jerry Mintz of the Alternative Education Resource Organization, "is an approach that is more individualized, has more respect for the student, parent and teacher, and is more experiential and interest-based."

While the earliest alternative schools were designed as options for any student who wanted to experience a different style of learning, today's public alternative schools are more likely to be problem-solving programs geared to serving a specific population of struggling students.

Education Week defines alternative schools as "public schools which are set up by states or school districts to serve populations of students who are not succeeding in the traditional public school environment." This shift in emphasis led Don Giles to write in *Changing Schools*, "The term alternative is no longer generally regarded as applying to a variety of models but instead has become associated exclusively with nonconforming programs for 'at risk' or 'bad' students."

Because alternative schools have meant different things in different communities, researchers looking to compare programs have run into an apples-and-oranges dilemma. As Raywid explains in *Making a Difference for Students at Risk*, "The challenge in researching effectiveness of these programs has been the absence of a standard definition."

Yet most alternative schools do emphasize central themes and philosophies, Raywid notes, citing "smallness, personalization, interpersonal relationships, and a primary focus on students as human beings."

By looking at patterns in alternative school organization, teaching methods, and philosophies, Raywid has found three models that emerge from the thousands of individual programs currently in place across the country.

• **Restructured schools.** These schools, progeny of the early free schools, may start as early as the primary grades. They bring progressive educational principles to a wide population of students. Some, such as Metropolitan Learning Center, a K-12 program in Portland, have endured since the 1960s. Many of the new charter schools opened since the early 1990s have adopted a similar child-centered philosophy. Although not specifically designed for at-risk youth, these programs often incorporate ideas that work to the advantage of students who are struggling in the mainstream.

• **Disciplinary programs.** Violent or disruptive students are "sentenced" to these diversion programs, such as New York City's recently approved Second Opportunity Schools. Sometimes nicknamed "last chance highs," these institutions provide high school or middle school students with a mix of behavior modification and intensive individual attention. In theory, they also benefit mainstream students by removing troublemakers from class.

• **Problem-solving schools.** Alternatives specifically designed for at-risk students, these programs tend to be nonpunitive, more positive and compassionate for students in need of extra help, remediation, or rehabilitation. They often provide a network of academic, social, and emotional assistance to students who have been unsuccessful in the mainstream. Pan Terra High School in Vancouver, Washington, for instance, develops a personalized learning plan for each student and allows for flexible scheduling, with class blocks offered from morning through evening.

If free schools sound somewhat like educational utopias, then Raywid suggests two more metaphors to describe the other models. Disciplinary programs resemble soft jails, while problem-solving schools are more akin to therapy.

HOW THEY SPELL SUCCESS

"This is the only school where I've never had an attendance problem, where I was interested in learn-

ing, and where the teachers were there to help me. Most people I know in my position would have quit school, so I'd say I chose 'the less traveled road.' The difference in my life has been great," wrote one student in an essay.

When alternative schools work, they work wonders. They offer students who thought they were failures a taste of success. They reach the hardest- to-reach. Although such stories can seem miraculous, there's no magic formula behind programs that enable students to succeed. Indeed, research shows that it's not what alternative schools teach, but how they work with students that can make a difference.

In Expelled to a Friendlier Place, Martin Gold and David W. Mann suggest two factors most likely to help delinquent youth improve in alternative settings:

1. A significant increase in the proportion of a student's successful vs. unsuccessful experiences
2. A warm, accepting relationship with one or more adults

A change of setting, they point out, can serve as a fresh start for a student who has learned to associate school with failure. As one teacher observes, "Kids know, when they arrive here, that they've stumbled somehow. And they know everyone else here has stumbled, too. This is a place where they can start over, without all the grief."

Ironically, the discipline problems that may have bounced students out of the mainstream tend to be reduced in alternative settings.

In a national survey, Raywid found that the personal relationships alternative schools foster between students and staff were more critical for success than curriculum or instructional strategies. Similarly, Barr and Parrett observes, "Many alternative educators report significant improvement that is not directly related to the curriculum or the instruction (although these most certainly make a difference). It is student attitudes that seem to make the difference.

In *"Overcoming the Odds,"* Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith note that the more resilient youth in their long-term study often had supportive teachers "who acted as role models and assisted with realistic educational and vocational plans."

Choice is another key to the success of programs that work. "Alternative schools must be membership institutions, places with which the students want to affiliate," Raywid reports. "Nobody gets sentenced here," explains one program director, "not the students or the teachers."

Rather than operating as dragnets to pull students back from the brink of failure, effective alternative schools are more like safety nets into which struggling students can choose to jump. When researchers at the University of Wisconsin looked at 14 schools with successful programs for at-risk youth, they con-

Strategies for Teacher Success

1. Meet students at the door of your room every single day.
2. Call each student by his or her first name.
3. Engage all students in each class each day.
4. Set high standards for behavior and work.
5. Clearly communicate your expectations for student behavior and work.
6. Use varied methods of teaching (hands-on and student-centered activities).
7. Be consistent in rewarding behavior and disciplining misbehavior.
8. Call parents with good news and concerns. Use the "sandwich" approach (put the concerns between slices of good news).
9. Understand the impact of homework on many students.
10. Let your students know that you are truly interested in their welfare.

SOURCE: Meridian Academy

cluded, "The key finding of our research is that effective schools provide at-risk students with a community of support."

Barr and Parrett synthesize research findings into these three "essential characteristics" of effective schools for at-risk youth:

1. Comprehensive and continuing programs. Students who are not thriving in mainstream schools are seldom helped by short-term alternatives that dump them back into their old schools after a few weeks or months. In long-term programs, students can benefit from efforts that may address academic, social, family, and health concerns.

2. Choice and commitment. In the most successful alternative programs, both students and teaching staffs choose to participate.

3. Caring and demanding teachers. Barr and Parrett point to caring and demanding teachers as perhaps "the most powerful component in effective programs for at-risk youth." They explain, "There is an abundance of research that emphasizes how important it is for teachers to care for at-risk youth, to believe that these students can learn, and then to hold high expectations for them as learners."

Small program size also seems to be a critical factor, according to both the research literature and those who work in alternative settings. "However great we may be," observes a writing teacher from an alternative high school in Portland, "even we wouldn't be getting very far if we had to deal with a class of 35 kids. Staying small is the only way we can keep these kids from getting lost all over again."

Students often arrive at alternative schools lacking or behind in basic skills. Many students are surprised at how quickly they can make up for lost time in programs that deliver individualized instruction. Rather than doing slowed-down, remedial work, they may find themselves on an accelerated learning curve.

In Teaching Advanced Skills to At-Risk Students, Barbara Means and Michael S. Knapp explain the logic behind accelerated learning for students who may have struggled to keep up in regular classes. Remedial education, they say, tends to "postpone more challenging and interesting work for too long, and in some cases forever. Educationally disadvantaged children appear to fall farther and farther behind their more advantaged peers as they progress in school."

Rather than focusing on a student's academic deficits and insisting on mastery of the basics before a student can move ahead, they outline an alternative approach that acknowledges a student's intellectual strengths. This doesn't mean ignoring the basics. Instead, they use "a complex, meaningful task" as the context for instruction.

The active learning approach found in most alternative settings means instruction is delivered through dialogue rather than lectures. Students practice advanced and basic skills while being actively drawn into problem solving. For instance, students might study the physical principles involved in shooting a basketball foul shot, or analyze the lyrics and structure of a rap song as if it were a sonnet. They wind up acquiring new skills along with a new belief in their capacity to think, and their leap in confidence can help make up for lost time.

Although alternative school teachers work with some of the hardest-to-reach students, they report a high degree of job satisfaction. They enjoy the creativity required to connect with students who have not previously enjoyed learning. In studies of the most effective alternative programs, researchers have found extensive collaboration between teachers. Alternative programs typically involve the faculty in designing programs and developing curriculum. One research team described "a climate of innovation and experimentation" among the faculty at effective alternative schools.

PIONEERING NEW IDEAS

One of the best known alternative school programs in the country was started almost by accident in New York's East Harlem neighborhood. Recounting the story in *Miracle in East Harlem*, former Deputy Superintendent Seymour Fliegel describes this neighborhood as "one of the toughest and poorest" in America, with one in seven adults unemployed and violent crime twice the citywide average. Being at risk of school failure was more the rule than the exception for his students. In 1973, East Harlem had the worst academic performance of New York City's 32 school districts. At one high school, 93 percent of the ninth graders dropped out before graduation.

Yet by 1987, the percentage of East Harlem students reading at grade level had soared from 16 percent to 63 percent. Student achievement zoomed from 32nd place to 15th place. Dropout and truancy rates had declined dramatically.

The difference, Fliegel asserts, could be traced to the opening of 26 small, innovative alternative schools focused on meeting individual student needs. Each school was started by a teacher or a small team of teachers who had a dream about how to deliver education. The district, frustrated by chronic student failure, gave them the autonomy to bend the rules and experiment with alternative approaches. The result, Fliegel believes, has been "more congenial environments for students and teachers alike." East Harlem took many of the lessons first learned in alternative schools back to the mainstream, creating small schools designed and run by committed teaching staffs who were encouraged to be creative in designing programs.

As school reform efforts continue in the Northwest and elsewhere in the country, similar applications of the alternative school model may be ahead. Alternative schools have pioneered such concepts as cross-age grouping, schools without walls, nongraded learning, competency-based graduation requirements, school choice, and site-based decisionmaking. Observe Barr and Parrett, "It is startling to consider the vast numbers of concepts, approaches, and programs first developed in alternative schools that now have become widely used in traditional public schools."

Despite their well-documented success and innovation, alternative schools continue to operate in the shadows of mainstream education, often fighting an uphill battle for respect. Some schools continue to struggle against being treated as "dumping grounds" for hard-to-handle kids. "They are likely to be seen as fringe or flaky...as programs for losers, misfits, misbehaviors," Raywid admits.

Gold and Mann, whose research has demonstrated the value of alternative programs for students with serious delinquency problems, lament that these innovative schools "are particularly fragile. It does not take much to close such schools—an incident of violent behavior, an unfavorable report on achievement test scores, a tight school budget."

By their very design, alternative schools have a flavor that's unlike the mainstream. "We have a different look, taste, and feel," acknowledges a teacher who has spent his long career in alternative settings, working one-on-one with students who could not, or would not, survive among "30 students in a cell with a bell."

For a student who has felt stifled in a traditional classroom, the difference can be as invigorating as fresh air. At his graduation from the Portland Night High School in 1997, Chris Moore summed up the benefits of an alternative education in his simple but joyous song:

I think it's amazing
What teachers here have done.
A kid comes in upside down
And they turn him around. ■

"Small program size also seems to be a critical factor, according to both the research literature and those who work in alternative settings. "However great we may be," observes a writing teacher from an alternative high school in Portland, "even we wouldn't be getting very far if we had to deal with a class of 35 kids. Staying small is the only way we can keep these kids from getting lost all over again."

MAI-C… A PLACE WH… KIDS BELO…

By Samantha Morrisey

WASILLA, A… D… comes s… here in late… Fingers of light stretch a… gray sky that holds the p… of turning blue. A school… rolls to a stop, snow cr… under its tires, and a gro… teenagers steps off the b… college sweater, plaid … brisk fall… backpack… headphones. Two toddle… hands with their moms… leave the … through t… doors into Mat-Su Alter… School.

Inside the heart of th… a packed, multipurpose… pulses with activity. M… round tables stud the flo… over her shoulder with mo… open at … records in ha… a tidy coffin of brown c… the hallways comes fr… computer … and alone on… Rovang's students mingle… friend … help themselv… breakfast. From his des… the front door principal … Burchell takes it all in. … nothing … to escape his … the needs … care of … while … with st… and answers … the phon…

When … Burchell finds h… of paper … Burchell look… and business … Kevin Whi… Hands … desire? … grade … room bro…

applause and cheers as Kevin takes back his credit slip with a grin. Each time a student earns half a credit or completes a course, Burchell performs what he calls a "ta-dah" before the entire school. Every achievement at Mat-Su, no matter how small, is recognized.

All of the students at this alternative school 45 miles north of Anchorage have failed in—or feel failed by—mainstream schools. Mat-Su accepts students between the ages of 15 and 21 who have dropped out of school, are behind in credits for their age, and are committed to earning a high school diploma and acquiring work skills. Students find in the school the direction and resources they need to get back on the education track. In the process, they discover how to become successful, contributing members of society.

Burchell—Mr. B. to everyone at the school—is principal, boss, teacher, caseworker, and friend to his students. He relishes every role.

"The number one criterion for school policy is what's going to help kids the most," Burchell says. He uses the analogy of a three-legged stool, the strongest piece of furniture you can build, to explain his definition of success. Academic skills, social skills, and vocational skills are the three legs. Kids need a balance of all three to develop a strong, stable foundation for the future.

For most of Burchell's students, social skills are the weakest leg, the reason they have failed in traditional schools. Of the 175 students at Mat-Su, almost a third don't live with their parents, a quarter are parents themselves, and nearly as many have spent time in juvenile detention or jail. Many students have been abused, addicted to drugs or alcohol, or homeless.

In educating these kids, the school has to first remove the barriers that keep them from getting an education. Mat-Su helps students overcome their challenging backgrounds by offering diverse programs, including an onsite day care center, food and clothing banks, an Alcoholics Anonymous program, and a full-time work-study coordinator. Perhaps most important, the school gives them a place where they belong.

A PLACE OF THEIR OWN

Beside Burchell's desk, a boy rifles through a box of snacks that sell for a quarter, and finally decides on some potato chips. When a lone coin drops into the box with a *plink*, Burchell looks up from his work and questions, "A dime, Todd?" Todd, who is fishing in his jeans pocket for the rest of the change, protests, "I don't want to rip you off, Mr. B. I'd just be ripping off myself."

The kids at Mat-Su have developed a sense of ownership in the school and their pride is evident. No graffiti decorates the bathroom walls or covers the tabletops. No cans or cigarette butts litter the parking lot. The school has had only five fights in 10 years, which is remarkable considering the behavior problems many kids have when they first walk through the doors.

"I won't tolerate graffiti or stealing," says student Steven Humphreys. "All the other schools, I didn't care. I would have burned them down myself. But this one, I won't let anybody (mess) with this one."

Steven started using drugs when he was 11 and was in juvenile detention six times before he was 16. Three years ago Steven decided to get sober, and he credits the school for helping him work through his addictions. "If I told them to go away, they wouldn't," he says. "When you screw up, they don't get on your case. They tell you what you did wrong and how to fix it."

The teachers at Mat-Su have changed Steven's approach to schoolwork because, for the first time, he was expected to succeed. "I disrespected the teachers at first," Steven says. "But the more I screwed up, the harder they tried. I never expected it in a million years. I expected to be kicked out in a few months."

Earning the trust of a student like Steven can take time, and teachers here have learned to balance optimism and realism with persistence. The school is open 12 months a year, 14½ hours a day.

Lydia Wirkus, who teaches English, writing, and government, says: "I think most of the kids come here not trusting, not believing in themselves, and with few appropriate social skills. They are usually way behind in academics. All we can do is meet them where they are and accept them for who they are—look past the weird hair and clothes, look past the anger. They may not have a clue how to change, but we give them ideas and let them do it."

The school's informal environment allows Wirkus and the rest of the staff to relate to students in ways that would be difficult in a larger school. Classes at Mat-Su are small, never more than 15 students, because these kids demand individual attention. Here, they receive it.

Faculty "offices" are desks in the main room where the students spend much of the day, and teachers take breaks and eat lunch with the students. Kids call teachers by their first names and often sit with them at their desks, where they catch up on their classes and their lives. The atmosphere is deliberate and designed to make students feel comfortable approaching teachers. Sometimes this is half the battle, because if a student doesn't feel comfortable approaching a teacher, chances are good that student will be too intimidated to ask for help.

The close quarters allow students to keep an eye on teachers in the same way teachers check on students. Many of these kids have never had positive relationships with adults and lack adult role models, so watching the teachers do their jobs, interact, and handle stress in constructive ways is often as crucial to the students' education as anything the curriculum provides.

At Mat-Su, nobody cares whether a student is a sophomore or a senior —it's all about credits and individual progress toward graduation. "The growth I see in them is the growth they choose to make," Wirkus says. "We can facilitate that growth, but we are in no way responsible for it."

GROWING WITH THE STUDENTS

The school has come a long way from its humble beginnings with a single $35,000 grant and five students in a neglected portable classroom behind Wasilla High School. Two and a half years ago Mat-Su moved to its present location in a former Chevrolet dealership, a 20,000-square-foot building on seven acres. In its 10-year history, Mat-Su has received more than $6 million in grants and gifts. The majority of the school's funding now comes from the Mat-Su Borough School District, but that wasn't always the case.

Every room of the school bulges with evidence of Burchell's creative fund-raising techniques. The initial furniture and toys in the day care center were made by prisoners and donated to the school. Computers, furniture, and soda machines came from a closing military school. Grow lamps and shelves in the greenhouse are compliments of the police department. Seized from marijuana growers in a drug bust, the equipment now helps lobelia seedlings survive the long Alaska winter.

"I have kneepads on underneath my pants. I have no pride left," Burchell jokes. "Most people don't tell you 'no' more than once when they know you are right."

Science teacher Tim Lundt has learned from Burchell what grants bring to the classroom. His students have been tracking ruffed-spruce grouse, a popular sport-hunting bird in the valley, in a project with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game that is funded by grants Lundt wrote. Every Friday three students traipse through bear country, supervised by Lundt, in search of the grouse. The students humanely capture the birds with snare poles and equip them with a nickel-sized radio collar. The class then tracks the grouse and looks for patterns.

In Lundt's classes, traditional science skills are taught through unconventional projects that challenge students and hold their interest. A road-kill moose sparked another project—and stocked the food bank—when students butchered the moose and canned the meat. Now Lundt's biology class is reconstructing the skeleton.

"The kids enjoy what we are doing," Lundt says. "A student once said, 'This is what I wanted —not book work, but hands-on stuff.' I try to come up with projects that keep kids involved. To show them that they can go to college and do science."

LEARNING TO BELIEVE

One of the first lessons kids at Mat-Su learn is to believe in themselves. They have all heard the put-downs and know that some people think their school is a place for losers. Some kids have even believed it themselves. These students may come to Mat-Su confident only in their ability to fail, but they walk down the aisle at graduation certain of their ability to succeed.

"It's okay not to be the best at everything. Just focus on what you are good at," Burchell tells his students. "Most of all please yourself. Succeed according to your own definition of success, not anyone else's."

More than 300 students have graduated from Mat-Su, and 75 have gone on to college. If college isn't a goal, then the school prepares students for jobs that pay more than minimum wage. "Kids need to learn how to learn, set goals, and develop real skills. We want to teach kids how to be dependent on themselves, not to depend on other people or on handouts," Burchell says.

Student Carolynn Laliberte has learned to depend on herself in her three years at Mat-Su. "In normal high school I learned nothing. All I remember are two words: facetious and enigma." Carolynn says. "Here, instead of teaching you who the third president was, they show you how to fill out tax forms." Jacob, her 20-month-old son, spends his time in the school's day care center chasing soap bubbles and bouncing on knees while his mom is in class.

Next year Carolynn will be attending the University of Alaska in Anchorage, and tears well in her eyes when she talks about graduating. Her biggest worry is Jacob being in a new day care center. The fact that the day care at Mat-Su is onsite makes it easier for students like Carolynn to leave their babies.

Carolynn thinks teen parents at Mat-Su have a better chance of succeeding than kids in mainstream schools, which is good because the school has close to 50 teen parents right now. "Don't sigh when you hear this," Carolynn says. "You should applaud because these are teen parents who go to school and have jobs and are parents."

Pregnant students and those with children are required to take parenting and life skills classes. An updated version of home economics, life skills teaches students how to manage a house, a car, and a job. In parenting class students learn the different behavioral and developmental stages of a child's life, but the atmosphere is informal, often more support group than traditional class. Sheri Lehman, who teaches parenting and life skills, often finds herself asking, "Is it more important to stay on Chapter 9 or to talk with a student who is tired because the baby was up all night?"

Burchell thinks of the school as life challenging. Because the majority of Mat-Su students leave high school and go straight to work, the curriculum concentrates on vocational skills as much as academics. Students are required to

work at least 15 hours a week in addition to their classes, and the school accommodates work schedules by staying open until 9:30 p.m. World of Work is one of the few required courses at Mat-Su, and students in this self-directed class write resumes and use a computer program called AKCIS to explore career paths and determine the types of work they are best-suited for.

"The job experience is great. They push you, but not to the point where your head is going to explode," says Tamara Tabor. Tamara is one of the students involved in the "Teen Power Hour," a show produced by a local radio station under the supervision of the school's work-study coordinator.

"On the first day of the radio show, you had an hour to prepare —write the opening, read it, write the closing, read it. I didn't even know I knew how to do it," Tamara says. "I found that if I don't know how to do something, or I'm not prepared, I pretend I know what I'm doing. So I pretended I was a DJ. I faked the whole thing, and it turned out fine."

Tamara, who was homeless from May to October of last year, has gained confidence since coming to Mat-Su, and her work with the show reflects this. "I've seen a lot of growth in myself. It's not all the school," Tamara says. "I've thought it would be fun to be a DJ. Maybe I can do it."

John House-Myers runs the vocational construction program at the school, and his students are

SHAWN MORGAN: Learning Responsibility and Respect

WASILLA, Alaska— Shawn Morgan chops a roasted red pepper, adds it to a bowl of minced onions, and tosses the two together. A radio blares overhead, drowning all sounds but that of knife hitting butcher block when he dissects the next pepper. Scooping the pieces with the flat side of the knife, he runs an index finger down the blade and slides the pepper into the bowl with the others. Morgan's restaurant opens for dinner in two hours, and he is making a sauce for tonight's special.

Morgan and his family own the Shoreline Restaurant on the banks of Wasilla Lake in Alaska's Matanuska-Susitna Valley. Morgan, the restaurant's chef, was the first student to graduate from Mat-Su Alternative School. Nov. 29, Morgan graduated in 1988, when the school was in its inaugural year. Back then the school was housed in half of a portable classroom behind Wasilla High School and had just five students.

The school has moved onto bigger and better surroundings, but it hasn't forgotten its roots. A gold plaque hanging over the door to the men's bathroom at Mat-Su bears the name Shawn Morgan and reads: "He helped acquire this building for MSAS."

Morgan dropped out of the mainstream high school when he was only three credits short of graduating. For Morgan, even that seemed like too much. He says he was working a lot, and partying a lot, and not taking advantage of his education. "I didn't have my priorities straight," he says.

When Morgan got his act together, he decided he needed to graduate. Going back to the public school after dropping out was not appealing, so Morgan decided to try the alternative school. "There you could just go and finish your credits," he says.

Morgan, who started working in restaurants years ago, has long had a goal of buying a restaurant of his own. He attended the Western Culinary Institute in Portland, Oregon, and his family bought the Shoreline last September. "We've outgrown this place already," Morgan says. "We've been jamming. We have a full house most days, and we are packed on the weekends."

Morgan says his time at Mat-Su, however brief, taught him two crucial things: responsibility and respect. He says principal Peter Burchell motivates his students. "I probably wouldn't have gone to college without talking to him. I went back years after I graduated to talk about college with him, whether I could go," Morgan says. "I guess he pulled something out of me."

Morgan remembers calling Burchell while he was at culinary school, especially during holidays or other lonely times. "What I've learned from him is basically that it all comes down to you. You're the one who's got to make decisions in your life," Morgan says.

A pan of demi-glaze simmers on the stove behind him, and he pauses to stir it. Morgan's time at Mat-Su was brief, but he was at the school long enough to develop a relationship with Burchell. Judging from the stories of Mat-Su students — both past and present — that's enough to change your life.

Samantha Morrison

involved in their biggest project yet, building a portable classroom for next year's science classes. Seven students gather around House-Myers in the field behind the school as he impresses on them the importance of measuring five times and cutting only once.

"Do you guys know how much this beam, times two, and this beam, times two, costs?" he asks the students.

"A lot of money," one boy quips.

"I want a dollar amount," House-Myers persists.

"A hundred dollars?" another boy guesses.

"Try $1,430," House-Myers tells them.

The class splits into two groups to measure a support beam that will be the foundation of the classroom. By the end of the hour a few of the students are worried about their progress. "It's all right. It's gonna work out," House-Myers tells them. "Trust me. It's gonna work out."

The construction projects are good for the students because they are tangible, House-Myers says. "You can stand back at the end of the day and say, 'This is what I did today.' It's real for them." The kids don't get paid for their work on the projects, but they do get school credit. House-Myers believes that for these students, success builds on success. "If we can hold on to you long enough, we will change your life," he says, and then corrects himself. "We will *help you* change your life."

Students at Mat-Su get out of the school what they put into it. They are given the resources and support to succeed, but they have to do the work.

Mat-Su is not required to accept referrals from mainstream schools. Prospective students are interviewed by a panel of students and teachers, and they must complete a detailed questionnaire about their specific goals, both immediate and long-term, to be admitted. Students must attend school on the closed campus for at least three hours each day, and missed time must be made up within two weeks. If an absence is not called in by 11 a.m., students double their make-up time. Students keep planners with daily, weekly, and long-term goals, and faculty advisors meet with them weekly to check their progress and give them a nudge when needed.

The school is good at giving second chances—and sometimes third and fourth chances as well. When a student doesn't show up for school, the faculty advisor calls. If the student still doesn't return, Burchell makes the call. Mat-Su always has a waiting list, so students who aren't willing to work lose their place to someone who is.

When kids don't work out and are suspended from the school, Burchell tells them, "We'll never stop loving you, but we'll never change the rules." Students are welcome to come back to the school when they are ready to follow the rules.

Burchell connects with most of his students, but has learned that it is impossible to reach everyone. For Burchell, the only thing harder than a student who drops out and doesn't return is when a student dies.

Eleven young trees line the front of the school, barely noticeable without their leaves. One has been planted for each student the school has lost in its 10-year history. Four more trees wait to be planted when the ground thaws in the spring. Some of the deaths were the result of accidents, but half were suicides. Burchell is silent as he thinks about the students who have slipped away. He has a theory that you have to either hug kids or harass them. "The only way to lose them is to ignore them," he says. "Silence is always approval."

"I was six-foot-five when I started this job, now I'm five-foot-six," Burchell jokes. "My body can't take much more of this."

Burchell plans to retire August 15, but he is confident that the school will continue to succeed. "I'm afraid for me personally leaving. I'm not afraid for the school. I've got a great staff," Burchell says. "I don't know a person who has a better job in the state of Alaska. I really don't."

The staff seems to feel the same way. "He's given us the opportunity to change a lot of kids lives. And it's changed our lives in the process," says House-Myers.

Two students lead toddlers, bundled in coats and caps, from the day care center to the front door to meet the bus. The toddlers make a beeline for Burchell's desk. Burchell —now Grandpa B.—takes a tin milk jug filled with candy from beneath his desk and trades lollipops for hugs. This is his favorite part of the day.

Some people may look at his school and see only misfits and dropouts. He sees opportunities and bright futures. As Burchell replaces the lid on his candy tin, his student calls out to her son. "Tell Mr. B thank you." ■

PORTLAND NIGHT HIGH SCHOOL: PRESSING ON THE ACCELERATOR

Story and Photos by SUZIE BOSS

By day, Grant High School in northeast Portland pulsates with the energy of 1,500 teen-agers following the rhythms they've come to associate with school. Lockers slam, bells ring, basketballs bounce, textbooks open and close at predictable times.

By night, a few dozen youth make their way downstairs to a corner of the Grant basement. There's a whole different rhythm when Portland Night High School comes to order. Most of these students have already put in a day's work before they slip into their wooden desk chairs. Those who are teen parents (about 15 percent of the group) have had their hands full all day, changing diapers, wiping noses, reading stories. Night school comes at the end of their day, but many of these students say it provides them with a new beginning in life.

For 25 years, Portland Night High School has offered students a way to complete their secondary education even if they've already started a job or a family. "These are the students who used to be frozen out of an education if they had to go to work," explains David Mesirow, who directs the award-winning alternative program and is also one of its five teachers.

Students must choose to enroll in this program, and choice remains a theme throughout their night school experience. The students themselves elect how fast they will move toward high school completion. Regular attendance helps them press ahead, but they aren't punished if work or family demands keep them away from class for a few days. "We're looking for ways to help students along," Mesirow explains, "not to punish them if they're absent." There's no assigned homework, although students can choose to do extra independent work to earn credits faster. "It's like pressing on the accelerator to help them get out faster," Mesirow says.

And grades? Forget about the old A-F scale. Nobody fails classes here. If their performance isn't up to par, they haven't failed; they just have more work to do. Report cards read like bank statements, with an accounting of credits earned and bar graphs showing the percentage of tasks completed. But that doesn't mean credit is given easily. Students must demonstrate their competency in order to earn course credits.

Curriculum includes high school standbys such as math, history, and writing, but the content is skewed to grab attention. A social studies course might focus on "street law," for instance. A class in which students read biographies helps their reading skills, while also introducing them to role models and giving them the uplifting message that "life is like a work of art."

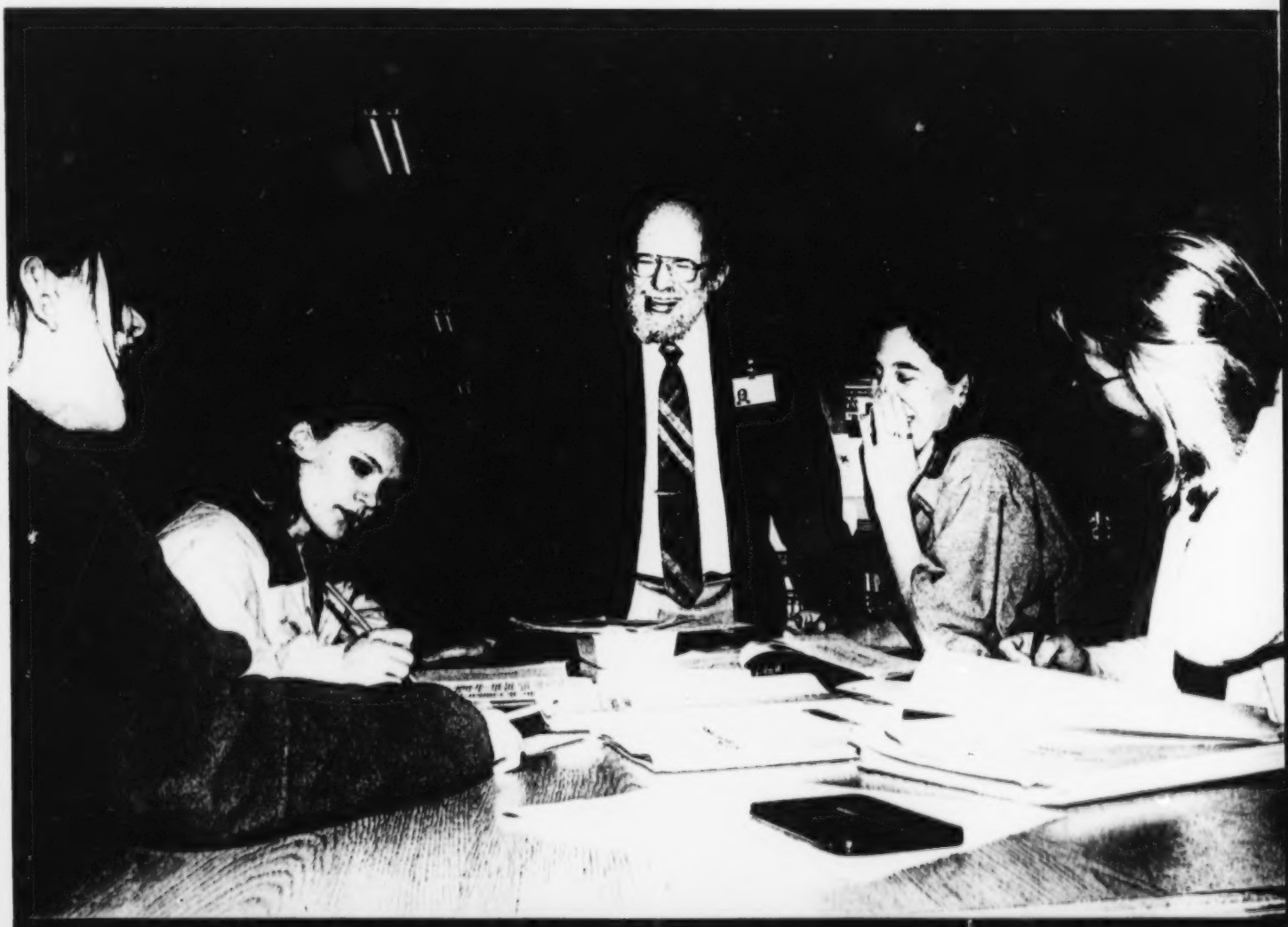
Writing labs offer students a chance to examine the difficult issues in their own young lives. In every class, thinking and problem-solving skills are honed and sharpened. Observed a recent program graduate, "Other schools I've attended teach you a collection of facts. This one taught me how to think."

Teachers at the night school "have to have an uncommon grasp of common knowledge," Mesirow observes. "It takes someone who can be flexible, who is able to listen, and who can help students connect pieces of information."

With room for 115 students and the length of stay averaging four months, this is a school where everyone is on the fast track. Traditional high school class standings (freshman, sophomore, etc.) don't apply here. Students understand that they're finished with school as soon as they complete the requirements for a diploma or pass the test to receive a GED. As a result, Mesirow finds his students "more purposeful" than their daytime counterparts in more traditional classroom settings.

Discipline is seldom an issue, even among students who arrive with a long track record of behavior problems. "We're relatively free of having to teach civilized behavior," Mesirow says.

Small class sizes enable teachers to get to know their students as individuals and to adapt lesson plans to match specific needs and interests. No one has a chance to feel anonymous or out of the loop. "Teachers speak to everybody in class, everyday. You can't slip through the cracks here," one student observed. Students call teachers by first name and know them as friends, mentors, and role models in addition to instructors.



AARON JOHNSON: Finding a Place That Cares

Wearing a crisp white dress shirt and tie as he heads off to his new job in a high-rise office building in Portland, 25-year-old Aaron Johnson has a purposeful look about him. This is a young man with a plan, heading somewhere in life.

When he pauses over a cup of coffee to think about who he was a decade earlier, he has trouble dredging up a clear memory. "That was a long time ago," he says.

At 16, Johnson had just dropped out of Portland's Jefferson High. Disenchanted and uninterested in school, pulling a paltry 1.8 grade point average, he didn't see the point in sticking it out any longer. "I never got a grip on what school was supposed to do for me," he recalls. He wasn't a troublemaker, at least not in obvious ways. "I was quiet, but that doesn't mean I was good. Sneaky was more like it," he admits. He felt hemmed in at home, which he shared with a grandmother who was also his adoptive parent.

"It was clear I wasn't going to succeed by following the normal course, so I figured I'd find another identity," Johnson recalls. He left home, moved in with a girlfriend, and was tempted to earn some quick money in the street culture that had sucked in many of his peers. "That could have given me a new identity, a different kind of membership," he admits. As a young black man without an education or a job, he had trouble imagining a decent future for himself.

But for Johnson, an alternative came along. His grandmother, who is a teacher, told him about Portland Night High School. From his first night there, he knew he had arrived somewhere different.

The teachers treated him in a way he had never experienced before, either. "From the start you get the feeling that somebody cares about you. Before, I felt like I had been branded as a failure. These teachers, though, refused to accept that. I responded to their faith in me." He felt his curiosity stir. One class discussion about the stock market grabbed his attention, and he wasn't ready to stop learning at the end of class. He cornered his teacher in the hallway. They made time to continue the discussion later, outside of school.

"That teacher became a mentor to me, and that was cool," Johnson says. "For the first time, I had a way to imagine myself as someone successful."

Johnson also found a day job as a messenger at a Portland law firm, where he encountered more role models. Suddenly, his own life seemed full of paths and possibilities.

At night school, the absence of traditional letter grades worked to Johnson's advantage. "If your work is not up to par, you do it again. There's none of the stain of failure."

Within a year and a half, Johnson had graduated from night school and began taking general education courses at Portland Community College. "That was another big step for me. At first it felt like a brick wall," he admits. He drew support from the night school teachers who had become his friends, allies, cheerleaders. "I knew I could always go back to them," he says.

Johnson took another leap and enrolled at Whitman College in Washington. He graduated in 1997 with a degree in philosophy. Now, he's working in the human resources department of the Northwest Regional Educational Lab while also pursuing graduate studies in philosophy at Reed College.

His dream today? Johnson aspires to earn his doctorate and become a professor of philosophy. It's a field of study he first encountered at Portland Night High School. "At night school, teachers would ask me, 'What do you think, Aaron? What's your voice saying?' That was different from memorizing a set of facts. Learning how to think for yourself is the whole point of an education. It's the singlemost important paradigm: asking yourself, 'Why am I here?'"

Suzie Boss

The deliberately small scale of operations allows for the one-on-one nurturing and tutoring that many students need. "In her old school, my daughter would get jammed up all the time," explained the father of a night school student. "Maybe she wouldn't understand an assignment. So she'd go to her teacher for help. But her teacher would be too busy to help her. So she wouldn't get it done. Then she'd fail the class because of uncompleted work. The same teacher would say, 'Why didn't you get this project done?' Here, they always make time to help you."

With Oregon school reform efforts putting a new emphasis on school-to-work transition, Portland Night High School suddenly finds itself on the cutting edge of innovation. The school-to-work (STW) concept may sound trendy, but this program has been offering a bridge between school and work since its founding a quarter-century ago.

Each student in the night school is expected to work, volunteer in the community, or handle parenting duties at least 16 hours each week, in addition to the 14 weekly hours of evening class. To smooth the transition between school and work, teachers visit the students' worksites. Back in class, teachers can help students make connections between what they're doing on the job and what they're learning at school. In addition, teachers have a chance to talk with employers about ways to make the curriculum mesh more effectively with real-world career opportunities.

Students also create a portfolio, which becomes a tangible record of their accomplishments. Mesirow considers the portfolio one of the program's most valuable components. "It's a habit in our culture to keep track of your stuff," he explains. "Your tax records, your immigration status, your work history—these documents tell who you are."

Student portfolios include a transcript and concrete examples of "what you can do," Mesirow explains. Students learn to use the portfolios as tools during job interviews to show exactly what they are capable of accomplishing. "It's your toolbox," Mesirow tells students, "the very best toolbox you can leave high school with."

The school-to-work program has earned Portland Night High School federal grants, awards, and other recognition. The school serves as a field test site for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Oregon Department of Education selected the school as one of 15 prototypes for what the Alternative Learning Centers called for in recent educational reform legislation.

Despite the acclaim, the school operates almost invisibly in the basement of a large school building that would otherwise sit empty at night. Night school students and staff leave no footprints behind. Operating in classrooms "borrowed" from the day school, the night program is a model for using facilities economically. But the lean arrangement creates some challenges. Teachers don't have access to bulletin boards to create visual displays that might enhance curriculum. They can't leave long-term projects or props up on the walls. There's no school library open at night, and the only drinking fountain in the basement space has been broken for two years. The gym is available to night students only for a few weeks in the spring.

The highlight of the year is the annual night school graduation, an emotional rite of passage for the youth who once thought they'd never get this far and the teachers who showed them the way. Last year, 54 students received high school diplomas and another 24 were awarded GED certificates. An open mike awaits any brand new graduate who wants to share an experience, a story, or a thought that first came to life late one night, in the basement of Grant High. ■

MANSION ON THE BLUFF CATCHES LIVES ON THE EDGE

By Shannon Priem
Photos by Rick Stier

The 1910 landmark perched on a bluff over the Willamette River houses one of Portland's best-kept secrets.

Outside, the yard is tended by a corps of teenagers while their aging golden retriever Elmo greets visitors.

Inside, the over-stuffed couches, bay windows, and lace curtains invite you into the laughter and conversation. You sense a home where people like each other—where the art over the huge mantle is charged with emotion, and the framed faces on bookshelves are exuberant and wearing graduation caps.

The area rugs scattered over polished oak floors are curled from years of wear and tear. You want to step on the edges. Don't bother because at least 100 pairs of shoes will scramble over them throughout the day with an even more relentless desire: to succeed in high school.

"We've been meaning to fix those," laughs Carole Smith, school director as well as student leader and friend.

But Smith and her staff are too busy fixing more important things.

The Open Meadow Learning Center is a private alternative high school tucked in a north Portland neighborhood.

It's about as far as you can go before falling into the Willamette River. Students land there in an academic safety net after going about as far as they can go before dropping out of school—or society.

Students like Angel, Mary, Veronica, Josh, Joel, and Nick had given up on high school (or high school had given up on them). As OMLC juniors and seniors, they now love talking about their future. Angel wants to be a pediatrician. Joel looks forward to his internship with the City of Portland. Mary's hoping for an interview with the Oregon Primate Center, and Josh has turned his energy from drugs and theft to championship boxing. Veronica wants to be a trauma nurse. Nick, who helped plant 2,400 seedlings, hopes to showcase the school's successful CRUE (Corps Restoring the Urban Environment) program at a national convention in New Orleans.

Words like *love* and *respect* and *no b.s.* are sprinkled throughout their conversations about staff and each other. Despite their "at risk" label, to an outsider they act more like young college students.

"I've heard these students speak in public and there's never a dry eye," says Jim Cruckshank, OMLC Board president and corporate controller for Schnitzer Steel.

OMLC focuses on assessment, academic skill development, life skills development, pre-employment training, peer-advocate groups, group counseling, individual and family support, and transitions to work or college.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED LEARNING

While the school's existence may be little known, there's no secret to its success. In a word: relationships.

Creating strong, positive relationships with caring adults has been OMLC's mantra since it began in 1971as part of the teen drop-in "coffee house" days in downtown Portland.

"We're distinct from many alternative schools because Open Meadow is relationship-based, not packet-based," explains Smith, executive director since 1982. "It's not a place where kids can power through to make up credits or do packets at home. Coming to school is part of our culture."

The center's Advocate Groups are key to building strong relationships. OMLC teachers have two roles—as educators and as advocates for their students. Besides teaching classes, the "teacher/advocate" works daily with groups of 10 to 12 students. They share problems, confidences, and feelings. Teacher-advocates will go to bat for their kids, and have been known to argue on their behalf at faculty meetings. They also work with parents and other organizations in the students' lives, such as counselors and probation officers.

"In many cases, we provide the first positive relationship they've had with an outside adult," says Holly Anderson, a teacher-advocate. "It is also a very powerful force, more than even I imagined." Anderson had just learned that some of her students were having trouble making the transition to their new advocate, since Anderson will be leaving to start OMLC's new middle school.

"I was surprised that some aren't able to make the transition—it shows how profound primary relationships are to these kids."

EIGHTY PERCENT ATTENDANCE REQUIRED

Getting students to attend school is among Open Meadow's biggest challenges since many students were classified as "non-attenders" in public school. Ironically, OMLC's average daily attendance rate is 86 percent.

The school's small size and low profile help keep OMLC close-knit, Smith says. With the lack of anonymity, students who miss school are missed. Staff quickly follow up with the missing-in-action. An 80 percent attendance rate is required to pass classes. If students don't keep their attendance up, hundreds are lined up to take their place. Last year, OMLC admitted 87 of 650 who applied.

Students earn admittance through a screening process in which they convince staff they will knuckle under and try hard. At the end of their 30-day probation period, they face the entire staff

"I get the attention I need and I have great relationships with the staff. It's a really special place."
Josh

THE MAGIC OF DARREN DAVISON

With his easy-going manner and charm, it's hard to see Darren Davison as a social outcast.

Granted, this industrial manufacturing engineer from Epson is wearing a neon green T-shirt under a red Hawaiian shirt — but it is Saturday, and he's opening the door of his own business venture, Merlin's Starship in southeast Portland. He sells the popular Magic: The Gathering™ sci-fi fantasy cards and other games.

Davison is among thousands of students who got a jump-start from the Open Meadow Learning Center in Portland. He attended in 1984 after being expelled from Portland's Wilson High School.

"I was an anomaly and a screw-off," he says. "I skipped school a lot. I wasn't nerdy enough, or popular enough to fit anywhere. I had no peer group. It was horrible."

Davison also recalls a passionate dislike for math.

"Hey, who invited the alphabet to algebra?" jokes the screw-off who later got hooked on math at Oregon State University, having no problem with relativities or the mu and wave field theory behind black holes in the universe.

Davison remembers Carole Smith for challenging him. "She stuck with me by showing a new way of looking at math."

After being expelled, going to OMLC was a relief to Davison. "I knew what was expected, but I was also terrorized by the stereotype of alternative schools. It caused me to think — they're no different than I am. We were all there for the same reason."

Davison got back into the swing and returned to Wilson High. The happy ending should start here, but it doesn't.

In eight months, Davison started skipping again and dropped out completely. "It was another big vicious circle. So they suspended me — how's that punishment for someone who skips school?"

But this time, he had the skills and confidence to get his GED at a community college in time to catch up to his graduating class and enter OSU that fall. He's 21 credits shy of an engineering degree but not for long. Epson is paying his tuition.

How would he change today's public high school?

"If I were president, I'd get rid of it," he says. "Seriously, it's been said hundreds of times, but the kids you have to pay attention to aren't the ones in the straight lines. Some of us don't fit in. Some of us tend to wreck the neat, tidy schedules teachers want to keep. Teachers need to understand the reason they're here is to help kids, not to stand at the front of the room."

His advice to students: "Get over the stigma of being different and don't worry about sticking out."

Today Davison looks forward to world travel, getting his engineering degree and running his own Magic shop. He plays the game as a math problem; runs tournaments and personally owns 2,000 cards, which he claims "borders on sickness."

He also collects Hawaiian shirts ... anything to fit in.

Shannan Prieur

again to discuss their progress.

The school is often the first structured experience for many kids. "A lot of our students raised themselves, so they struggle with the rules," Anderson says. "But we love them and they know it. As they begin to learn respect for us and for themselves, they can address the issues that blocked their success in school. High-risk youth need consistency from someone they trust."

Angel is a good example of that struggle. "I tried three times to get in, but I was just too busy being into myself," she says. "I was stubborn and angry." Angel was failing and had been expelled from public high school, then turned her "in-your-face" anger at Open Meadow. Today her attendance is near perfect and she leads school events.

So what happened?

Angel thinks about the question, nervously twirling her blond hair. "I think the reason is love."

Like other students, Angel had given up on learning. Part of her defiance was to protect herself from failure. She came to Open Meadow unable to spell even the simplest words. She hid behind her computer, avoiding staff. She wouldn't even look at her own test results. She thought she was stupid. She was ashamed, but didn't want anyone to know.

"They pay attention to you as a person, and they don't let you get away with anything," she says. "I finally learned that I could learn. I can do more, read more. I never had a guilty conscience before, but now I have one whenever I even think about skipping school."

A SAFE PLACE

"OMLC creates a safe environment for students like Angel," says Smith, noting that Angel now has beautiful writing skills and is one of the school's strongest leaders. "Once she knew she could learn she was engaged in the process."

Mary, stopping by to visit between classes, agrees. "Everybody cares here," she says. "You don't get brushed aside and have to deal with stuff alone. I kept saying I was quitting, well that was a year ago."

Josh had taken a wrong turn in life, stealing cars and landing in a drug rehab center. "I took a look around and didn't want to be there," he said. "I needed to get back to business. I was outta there quicker than anyone, four months." At OMLC he caught up with school, started boxing, and has become a leader on the school's Student Review Board. The board influences decisions, including hiring new teachers. "I feel important because we have a say here," Josh says.

What keeps him from slipping back?

"I have a memory. And you're lucky only so long," he says. "I'd eventually end up in jail, so why start again? I think about having a family, a boat, you know, the normal things."

"If not for Open Meadow, I would have dropped out of high school. This school has changed my life dramatically."
Kelli

"When I started here, everybody made me feel welcome. I feel like I belong."
Angel

CRUE: UNDOING THE DAMAGE

Joel, dressed in a crisp white shirt, bounds down the steps with a fist full of ties. He's dressing on his way to "one of those over the shoulder deals" with the City of Portland environmental bureau. "I'm helping them set up a database," says the clean-cut boy in wire rim glasses.

He and classmate Nick are part of CRUE, OMLC's environmental work experience project with the Wetlands Conservancy. Last year they completed 42 service projects in the metro area. They were among the heroes who labored through the night to control damage during the Portland floods in 1996.

And they point with pride to the nature work they do. "We planted 2,400 trees—that's a good feeling," Joel says.

For Nick, CRUE made science come alive. His excitement for the environment comes through. "We've been working on the slough, restoring wetlands and water quality," he says. "Employers look for work experience, and I'm learning all kinds of stuff, like bioengineering and math."

Teacher Andrew Mason sees the healing aspect of CRUE. "These kids have taken a beating on their own internal landscape," he says. "If they can clean up the world around them, it helps restore them. We work side by side, and when the opportunity comes up, I teach. When they make this sudden connection between learning and work, the questions pour out."

Another student says it best: "I really like doing things for the community because I want to make up for the damage that I did to it before, and it makes me feel good about myself when I go home."

CLASSES IN CUBBYHOLES, BEDROOMS

Classrooms are small, perfectly sized to fit into the mansion's bedrooms, lofts, and dens. Class sizes average 12 students. OMLC is a fully accredited high school, on track with Oregon's Educational Act for the 21st Century.

"It's exciting to know that what we've been doing all along is now considered mainstream," Smith says, noting their emphasis on applied learning. Classroom subjects include writing, journalism, English, literature, history, global studies, and government. Guests, such as actor/playwright William Harper from the Portland Repertory Theater, give special classes. Harper led a nine-week course culminating in professional actors performing the works of two student playwrights.

And at graduation, every student gives the valedictorian speech.

OUTSIDERS CREDIT STAFF

"Open Meadow is the perfect example why Oregon doesn't need a charter school law," says Leon Fuhrman, Oregon Department of Education alternative education specialist. "It's the oldest program I know of and Carole (Smith) has always been able to attract staff who really care about kids. It's the diversity of programs we offer that students, all with differing needs, can reach the new high standards. Why invent something new? We already have it."

A department survey revealed that 80 percent of students in alternative education programs stay in school. Fuhrman notes: "I can't wait to see how they do with the CIM and CAM; I have a hunch they'll create a little jealousy." The CIM (Certificate of Initial Mastery) and CAM (Certificate of Advanced Mastery) are part of Oregon's Educational Act for the 21st Century. Students reach these milestones after demonstrating levels of knowledge and skills that indicate an ability to succeed in life—regardless of their chosen path—after high school.

Jim Cruckshank, OMLC chairman, also credits Smith and her staff. "The staff is amazingly dedicated, which is what it's all about. They have created an environment in which kids want to learn."

Multnomah County, which also contracts students at OMLC, sees commitment and rigorous standards as the school's strength. "They have outstanding leadership," says Bob Lewicki, alternative education program coordinator. "Carole is way modest. A lot of people have come and gone in those 20 years, but you can bank on their dedication."

Smith's love of working with

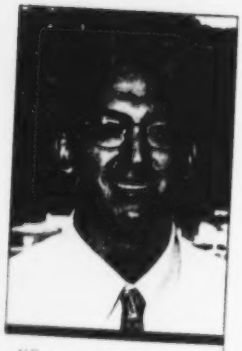
teenagers shows. She knows them all by name, and casually exchanges informed greetings with them. Her office takes up the mansion's parlor. There are no doors.

When asked questions about the academic approach or research used in dealing with at-risk youth, her answers are simple.

"We build assets in kids," she says, listing things like integrity, caring, decisionmaking, and resistance skills. "They need them to succeed."

With a big smile Smith adds, "I *like* what we do. We are continually touched and awed by our kids. It's a genuine respect."

Shannon Priem is an education writer from Salem. She also works as the public information specialist for the Oregon School Boards Association. ■



"Employers look for work experience, and I'm learning all kinds of stuff, like bioengineering and math."
Joel

MERIDIAN ACADEMY WHERE KIDS ARE VISIBLE AND VALUABLE

By Lee Sherman

Photos by Chuck Nacke

MERIDIAN, Idaho— When science teacher Larry Ford got the phone call about a job opening at Meridian Academy alternative high school, "right away the red flags went up," he recalls.

He pictured "kids with chains, motorcycles, Hell's Angels." The Hollywood-inspired images of knife-wielding hoodlums troubled the bookish teacher, whose last job was in Scottsdale, an affluent Arizona suburb where "Mama is a brain surgeon, Daddy's a corporate lawyer" and Junior is headed to Stanford or Harvard.

"I am not streetwise," Ford confesses, recalling the trepidation he felt at confronting a classroom full of at-risk students. "I thought, 'Those kids'll eat me up.'"

A single day at the academy vanquished Ford's misconceptions. The students he found at Meridian were familiar to him—not from movies and TV, but from big, traditional high schools. They are the "church-mouse quiet" kids who sit at the rear of packed classrooms, unnoticed. Sometimes they sleep at their desk. Often they're absent. They fall farther and farther behind while their teachers, unaware of their troubles, are "going 100 miles an hour" through the mandated

curriculum.

"I was looking at those little faces," Ford says, "and I recognized them immediately. I thought, 'I know you. You're the kids that weren't getting the attention.' All of a sudden, I realized these were good kids—these were *good* kids. It was the exact opposite of that image I had in my mind."

Ford's term for such a student is "the invisible child." Over and over, Meridian Academy students tell about feeling overlooked, anonymous, and unimportant at the big high schools, which typically serve hundreds or even thousands of youths. "Lost in the shuffle" is how they often describe their experience.

To these kids, the 150-student alternative school is a last chance, a final opportunity to earn a diploma. Their school is set among industrial parks and horse pastures in this fast-growing farming-town-turned-bedroom-community near Boise. Meridian Academy offers a chance at success for youths who've dropped out or nearly dropped out, who lag far behind their classmates in credits and grades, who have children or babies on the way, who have drug or drinking problems, who act out or break the law, and youths who've left home to live on their own.

"Every student has a different reason why they're here," says history teacher Bob Taylor, a founding staff member at the eight-year-old school. "Lack of intelligence, however, is not a reason—not ever."

In a decade of dealing with at-risk youth, Taylor has never found an incapable learner. What he has found in abundance are what he calls "discouraged learners." Among the discouraged learners attending Meridian Academy are:

• Amanda, an 18-year-old married mother whose year-old baby, Harley, stays in Meridian's onsite day-care center while Amanda attends classes. After dropping out to have her baby, Amanda decided to return to school for her diploma. "I don't want to be a stupid mom," Amanda told a group of visiting educators recently. "I don't want my daughter to come home and ask me a question, and I don't know the answer." She says the "one-on-one" at Meridian has made the biggest difference in her school life. "It's the best school I've gone to," she says. "Everybody is really focused on goals, not just getting by. And they're really understanding with teen moms."

• Sean (a pseudonym), whose dad died after accidentally shooting himself while the boy, then 11, was in the next room. "It was a really grueling sight for an 11-year-old to see—for *anybody* to see," Sean says. After getting heavily involved in drugs and finally dropping out of school ("I absolutely, positively hated Middleton High School"), Sean found his way to Meridian. "All the teachers really care about you. I've heard five times I've been talked about in staff meetings." Now a 4.0 student, Sean aspires to a career as a police officer.

• Anna, a 16-year-old who is repeating her freshman year after failing at the big high school. "There were too many kids there," she says. "I sat in the back and raised my hand, but I never got any help. I went home crying every day. Here, everyone is very accepting. I know now that I'm going to graduate." She wants to attend college and become a counselor at an alternative school—a goal that would have been unthinkable before Meridian. "I always had really bad grades, and I thought no college would accept me. Now I have all As."

Students and faculty agree that the school's small size is its biggest strength. With only 15 kids in the average class, teachers greet each student as he or she comes through the door. When problems at home or in school are evident in a student's face or demeanor, the teacher pulls the child aside and offers help.

For example, one recent Tuesday a boy came to school angry and agitated. His first-period teacher directed him to the counselor, who mediated a two-hour discussion between the student and his parents about a family problem that had upset the boy.

Later that day, Taylor—one of two teachers assigned to afternoon parking-lot duty, where they bid farewell to students each day—gently consoled a girl who was crying and threatening to drop out over an incident involving some other students. Telling her "how bad the staff would feel" if she didn't come back, Taylor advised her to seek out the school counselor and confer with the principal to solve the problem in a more positive way.

"I just wanted to let her know we were there and we cared," Taylor said afterward.

The Number One reason students give for liking Meridian Academy is just that: Teachers care.

"All the teachers were glad to have me," says John, who came to Meridian after dropping out of the local high school midway through his sophomore year. "They make you feel like you're important—you, as a person. It blew my mind. I loved it from the first day. Everybody is really welcoming."

Greeting students at the classroom door "every single day" is a schoolwide strategy the staff uses to connect with students, Taylor says. Engaging each student in class each day is another way teachers make kids feel visible and valuable. First names are used exclusively at Meridian, where the signs outside the modular classrooms read ROOM 5—BOB, or ROOM 12—LARRY.

Friday afternoons, teachers and students meet for "family group"—one teacher to 10 or 12 students—where problems are aired, support is given, and bonds are forged. After collecting their diplomas at the yearly commencement ceremony, graduating seniors get an embrace from each of their teachers in the "hug line."

The family feeling that flows from this culture of caring helps fill the biggest gap in many at-risk

BOB TAYLOR: "UNEDUCABLE" TEACHER

It was the magic of the municipal airport — the roar of planes taking off, the whir of propellers, the romance of crop dusters swooping low over wheat fields and not the fact that lured Bob Taylor (sic) from the classroom.

His dad owned an airplane, a Stinson Station wagon of the air, and Taylor started hanging around the hangars and runways of his hometown of Modesto, California, when he was only 11. By the time he was a sophomore, a part-time job washing planes had turned into a full-time job servicing crop dusters.

He and his teachers were at odds. "I would come to school dripping with chemicals and sulfur," he remembers. "They didn't like me, and I didn't like them. My interests just weren't in school."

After the school ousted him, their exact words were "You're uneducable," he recalls, he became an aircraft mechanic and joined the Air Force, where he spent 27 years as a supervisor at bases around the world. But he always regretted not having his diploma. After a short stint as a trainer in the Saudi Arabian air force, he returned to the States and at age 33 graduated from high school. A bachelor's degree from Boise State University followed. In 1981, the school dropout became a teacher.

He jumped at the opportunity to help start Meridian Academy eight years ago.

"The dropout kids need a lot more help than other kids, and it just felt right there for them," Taylor says. "We don't have it in the big schools. Families don't know what to do. Court systems are cramped. TV and drugs get more pervasive."

Taylor once conducted an informal survey of 25 Meridian students. He asked them two questions: What's the worst thing that ever happened to you? And, what's the best thing that ever happened to you? Nineteen students — 76 percent — had the same answer for Question 1: My parents' divorce. Twenty-five students — 100 percent — had the same answer for Question 2: Coming to this school.

"There is a family atmosphere in this school," Taylor says. "I think that is a key to success with these kids. I look every kid in the eye every day when they come through the door. If they're not feeling well I know it."

Taylor has visited alternative schools and talked to at-risk kids all over the West. Everywhere, he says, these students will give you the same answer for why they are successful in an alternative school: "The teachers care for me. They understand what my problem is. They work with me to get the job done."

Schools like Meridian Academy are in far greater demand than supply, Taylor says. A second alternative high school and an alternative middle school that recently opened in the Boise area filled up immediately. All the schools have waiting lists.

"We're just hitting the tip of the iceberg on the kids who need help," Taylor says. "The whole educational system in America has to change."

Lee Sherman

students' lives: a stable and nurturing home life. The lack of family structure, in fact, is the "common denominator" for Meridian students, according to Principal Marilyn Reynolds.

"I like the family environment," says Ethan, who has kicked a drug habit to become an honor student at Meridian. "The boss over here (he points to Reynolds)—she's like our mom."

TEACHING STRATEGIES

The basic curriculum at Meridian Academy is nearly identical to the curriculum of other local schools. Textbooks are the same. Nothing is watered down.

But that's about where the similarities between Meridian and regular high schools stop. Drop in on any class, any time, and you'll observe students discussing a magazine article, rehearsing a play, building a science exhibit, cooking a meal. You'll see students working in groups, tutoring each other, conferring one-on-one with teachers, compiling portfolios of their best work. What you won't see are teachers lecturing at the front of the room while students listen passively.

"I have students get involved with what they're learning—build it or make it or do it—instead of reading it out of a book and answering the questions at the back," says PE and health teacher Audra Urie. "They all have different learning styles, and I teach to all of them—the verbal learners, the hands-on learners, the auditory learners, the visual learners. I want my kids to be physical and talk and communicate."

Caring for "simulator babies" around the clock was one recent activity for Urie's health and adult-living classes. In the "Baby Think It Over" program, students sample parenthood with computerized dolls that act like real babies, right down to the 2 a.m. feeding. Both boys and girls tote car seats, diaper bags, and blanketed "babies" around school and at home, keeping diaries about their experience and engaging in class discussions about issues such as child abuse and neglect.

In Greenbelt Guides, a class developed by Taylor, Meridian Academy students teach lessons in botany, biology, ecology, and geology to local fourth-graders. The older students lead the younger ones on an exploration of the 90-acre Boise River greenbelt, which includes a wildlife preserve and 15 miles of paved paths.

The 16 lessons unlock the secrets of local flora and fauna such as willow, cottonwood, blue heron, and beaver. They recreate the geologic history of nearby Boise Range. They reveal the principles of the food chain. They discuss human impact, both positive and negative, on the land and on the water. They weave local lore and history throughout the curriculum. Community collaborators on the class include the Boise Historical Museum, the Basque Center, and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

Science Circus is another Meridian program that brings together Meridian students with elementary kids for mutual enrichment. In this project, funded by a $15,000 grant from US West, the high schoolers once again serve as mentors and teachers when they research, build, and write science demonstrations for younger students. They prepare packets for elementary teachers and suggest follow-up activities to extend the lessons, which travel to area elementary schools.

The one place where Meridian's curriculum veers from the mainstream is the added requirement for a career awareness class called Work Orientation—a place where students can begin linking their learning to life beyond the campus. The class, which offers a job shadowing experience and guest speakers from the community, focuses on topics such as interview skills and resume-writing strategies, and helps students assess their job-related abilities and interests.

One policy cuts across all subject areas: no homework. A big reason at-risk kids so often fall behind in regular schools, according to Meridian staff, is that they rarely complete their homework. Many come from homes of poor or modest means, and they need to hold after-school jobs. Some have babies or toddlers who need their attention. Others attend trade school or vocational classes at night. And many come from homes that are chaotic, violent, or abusive. Concentrating on the French Revolution or the conjugation of Spanish verbs in the midst of family turmoil is tough for even the most well-intentioned student.

To compensate for the lack of homework, class time is extended to an hour and seven minutes. Friday afternoons are dedicated to finishing or making up work. Kids who've completed all their assignments can leave early—a powerful incentive for students to stay on top of their schoolwork. Three Saturdays each quarter, teachers are available to help students catch up on missed work.

Teacher expectations for Meridian students are not just high—they're huge. Students must achieve at least a 70 percent record in each class, or keep working until they do. While nearly a quarter of Meridian students who start each fall leave by spring, the 75-percent retention rate is remarkable for a population that had been 100 percent on track for dropping out, Reynolds notes.

Says Taylor: "I guarantee you, when you set high expectations, the kids will rise to meet them."

DISCIPLINE

At Meridian Academy, the teachers' caring attitude attends to students' hearts. Hands-on, student-centered teaching attends to students' minds. A third key element of the Meridian mix—clear, consistent discipline—attends to students' behavior. For kids whose home lives typically lack order and structure, and whose school careers often are

blotted by tardiness, truancy, and other troubles, unequivocal discipline is mandatory, says Meridian's principal.

"These kids have proven that they don't do well without a lot of structure," Reynolds says. "Part of love is discipline. Good parents administer discipline; there are clear expectations, and the consequences are administered fairly. That's what we do here. I think that's partly why we become the family."

As chief disciplinarian, Reynolds' tasks include signing forms from

the state verifying that students are enrolled and therefore can qualify for a driver's license (in Idaho, dropouts lose their licenses). She writes notes to probation officers vouching for young violators' regular attendance and good citizenship in school. And she handles referrals from teachers—lots of them.

Just after spring break, she shuffles through a backlog of warnings and referrals, most of them fairly mild in nature.

"Oh, my gosh," Reynolds exclaims as she looks through the stack of green slips. "Calvin (a pseudonym) has a discipline referral for using the F-word."

"I want to hear about this, young man," she says when Calvin is seated in her office. "How did that happen?"

"Honestly, I can't tell you how that word came out," he says, sounding genuinely mystified.

She looks through Calvin's file, going over his past offenses—kissing another student on campus, throwing a hair tie during an assembly, rough-housing, being late, slipping off-task in computer lab. He agrees to watch his language and actions more closely in the future.

The parade of errant students to the principal's office continues. Several students are in a precarious spot. With two discipline referrals for the semester, they are just one referral from being sent back to their home high school—a terrifying fate for many Meridian kids.

"To even hint that you might send them back to that other environment, they just go nuts," says Ford. "It's just like saying, 'We're going to cast you off into hell.' They've experienced terrible failure there. Who among us wants to go back and be a loser again?"

As difficult as it is to send kids away, Reynolds is comforted by knowing that all students are well versed in the Student Behavior Policy—a terse, two-page document which they must read and sign when they are admitted and each semester thereafter. Because students sit on the policy committee and have a hand in shaping it, they regard it with a sense of ownership. When they don't like the policy, they have an avenue for protest. Most importantly, Reynolds says, they know that discipline at Meridian is even-handed, never arbitrary.

"Sometimes I'm in tears, and they're in tears," she says. "But they hug me and they understand, because it is consistent, and they know the rules."

After three referrals (or two from the same teacher), students are sent to Student Court. In this most unusual court, teachers, counselors, and principal serve simultaneously as witnesses, jurors, advocates, prosecutors, and judges. They present evidence of the student's misdeeds, but only after describing the student's positive traits, abilities, and accomplishments.

The student and his or her parents get a full voice in the proceedings—a chance to explain circumstances that led to the rule violations and to make assurances for better performance in the future. In the end, the student and parents leave the room, and staff members vote to keep or dismiss the youth.

"It was done with love," says Debra Woods, a mother whose tardiness-prone son Donald recently avoided going back to his old school when the Student Court voted to give him another chance to get to class on time.

Straight-A student Ashley (a pseudonym) wound up in Student Court recently after missing 14 days of school—many of them

without the required note from a doctor's office or courthouse explaining the absence. One by one, the staff talked about Ashley's outstanding scholarship and their puzzlement over her absences.

"I see in you a wonderful, bright, articulate student who can do anything," said English teacher Tina Roehr. "When a teacher gets a student like that, she says, 'Thank you, God.' I want you to graduate more than anything in the world. I want to know what we can do to keep you."

Tearfully, Ashley admitted to suffering from family- and school-related stress and frequent bouts of depression. She said she would seek a doctor's prescription for an antidepressant medication that had helped her battle depression in the past. She asked them not to send her back to her old school, which she disliked because "it was big and impersonal."

"It was like I was a number instead of a student," she said.

After she left the room with her dad, staff members quickly cast their votes on pink slips, which they folded and passed to Reynolds.

"You bunch of wimps," she said, jokingly.

The staff had voted to give Ashley one more chance to stay at Meridian Academy. As part of the contract she would sign, she would agree to check in with the school counselor weekly and to stay on her medication.

BODY LANGUAGE

When administrators from other Boise-area schools visit Meridian Academy, they often are floored by the change they see in students who once were sullen or surly.

"They can't believe the demeanor of the kids," Reynolds says. "Their body language has changed. Their whole persona is different. There's a different aura around them."

It's the aura of success, says Larry Ford. "Physically, you can read their body language when they come in," he says. "Their shoulders are rolled. They will not look me in the eye. Their heads are down, and they mumble. They're belligerent. They've been beat up and picked on by teachers, adults at home, other students. You'll hear 'em say, 'I'm a loser. I'm dumb. I'm stupid.'"

He tells a story of an 18-year-old boy standing at his desk after class, crying. When Ford asked him what was wrong, the boy held up an assignment that had just been returned. It was marked with a B. He said: "I've always gotten Ds or Fs. This is the first B I've ever had."

Says Ford: "They start to experience success. It only takes a few weeks, and you notice they raise their head up. Next, they start looking you in the eye, and their shoulders are back. Pretty soon, they start thinking about vocational school or technical school or college—the last thing they ever thought about in their lives." ■

Resolutions

- To get at least a 3.0 for my GPA
- To give more respect to my family
- To cut down on smoking
- To stay out of trouble with the police
- To be kind to more people

—Meridian Academy student

Resolutions

- Graduate next year
- Go to college
- Get my truck paid off
- Stop hanging out in the
- Get a hard going

—Meridian Academy student

Resolutions

- Have no chemical dependency
- Hopefully not sick
- Get a good paying job
- Get a new car
- Have fun in college

—Meridian Academy student

A UNIQUE SERIES OF TEACHER RESOURCES AND STUDENT LESSONS, *WorkMatters* is a practical, activity-driven curriculum designed to help students develop the skills, habits, and self-awareness required to succeed in the workplace.

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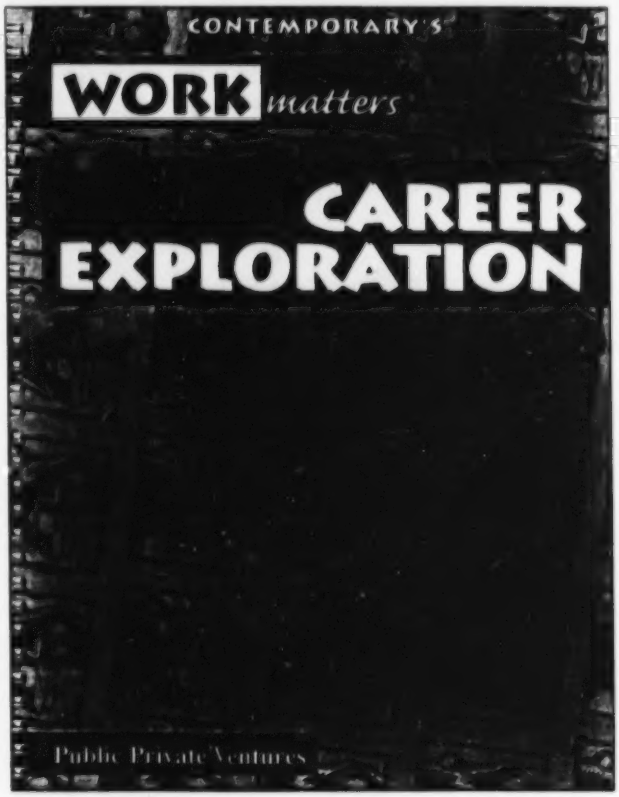

Course content in *WorkMatters* is delivered through modeling, guided practice and student discovery, and activities for individuals and small groups. Students maintain portfolios in each unit and are actively involved in their learning by making presentations, reading and writing, and working collaboratively.

Units can be ordered individually or as a complete set. The set includes five teacher resource books, step-by-step lesson plans for 60 complete lessons (each unit contains 12 lessons), and assessments for each unit.

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DESIGNED TO GUIDE EDUCATORS IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS, *Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth* provides practical information and step-by-step descriptions of programs that work.

Northwest authors Robert Barr and William Parrett debunk some of the myths surrounding what works in serving at-risk youth, identify factors that place a student at risk, synthesize what is known about students at risk, and describe essential characteristics of effective programs, ranging from kindergarten through high school.

Innovative ideas for restructuring and improving public schools to better serve all students are also provided. The authors advocate eliminating programs and practices that discriminate against at-risk youth, and redesigning the traditional teaching and learning approach that has been long used in public education.

"To be successful with all children and youth demands that schools must start as early as possible, work extensively with parents and the larger community, provide long-term comprehensive support, and significantly change the teaching and learning process that has been used in public schools," stress the authors.

From directories and newsletters to organizations and funding sources, the final chapter provides an encyclopedic list of resources dedicated to improving schools and the lives of youth. The chapter also contains an updated bibliography of research on critical issues, schoolwide approaches and interventions, and classroom strategies.

Finally, to determine the extent to which your school is addressing the needs of at-risk youth, self-evaluation checklists are provided in the book's appendix. Topics for evaluation include shared vision and goals, parent involvement, early childhood and preschool programs, curriculum and instruction, and social services.

Hope at Last for At-Risk Youth

was published in 1995 by Allyn & Bacon publishers, a Simon and Schuster company.

IN *EDUCATING AT-RISK YOUTH: PRACTICAL TIPS FOR TEACHERS*, author Andrea Baker synthesizes the practices of teachers in the Northwest and throughout the country who are successfully motivating discouraged, disengaged youth by creating a learning environment that makes them want to return to the classroom each day instead of giving up.

Organized into five areas—curriculum, methodology, counseling and advocacy, community partnerships, and transitions—the guide includes "essential ingredients" for each area as well as recommendations from practitioners.

The essential ingredients for curriculum, for example, are:

- Make the curriculum useful and meaningful for the students today as well as in their futures.
- Structure academic success for all students and use their success to address positive attitudes and self-esteem.
- Communicate clear learning goals that are challenging and reachable for all students and frequently encourage students to articulate and apply the goals to their own lives.
- Within any subject area, teach reasoning, communication, and life survival, as well as work attitudes and habits.
- Make it experiential whenever possible (for example, provide opportunities for community service, individual or group projects, and internships).
- Adapt the curriculum materials so they speak directly to the needs of the students. Don't rely on educational materials you have been given; improvise and scrounge when necessary.

The 33-page guide is full of ideas contributed by teachers who are successfully redefining the roles they play in their students' lives. Instead of addressing major policy issues and roadblocks to effective teaching that often sidetrack teachers, Baker focuses on what a lone classroom teacher can do without additional resources or training.

To order single copies of the guide, send $10.60 to NWREL Document Reproduction Service, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, Oregon 97204. The guide is also available through ERIC Document Reproduction Service (Document Number ED 319 875).

FOR TEACHERS WHO BELIEVE THAT A SOLID EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION INTEGRATES ACADEMIC, CAREER DEVELOPMENT, AND LIFE SURVIVAL SKILLS, NWREL's Education and Work Program has developed *Connections*, a comprehensive set of products and services designed to link work and learning.

"The Integrated Workplace Learning Project," one available product, helps teachers structure and document what students learn outside the classroom, connect it to academic coursework, and determine guidelines for earning credit. In "Survival Skills: A Guide to Making It on Your Own," students learn real-life skills such as registering to vote and applying for a loan, and experts from the community "certify" students as competent in each skill. Strategies for recruiting community experts are included. "Learning in the Community: From A to Z," suggests more ways that students of all ages can learn using nontraditional resources in the local community.

Other offerings for teachers include an employer recruitment and orientation guide and a learning site analysis form. Career exploration and job shadow guides are also available for both staff and students.

For more information about *Connections*, contact Andrea Baker at 1-800-547-6339 ext. 595 or e-mail bakera@nwrel.org. The products can be ordered through NWREL's Document Reproduction Service, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, Oregon 97204.

TWO OTHER RECENT BOOKS PROVIDE IN-DEPTH INFORMATION ON ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS AND AT-RISK YOUTH.

John Kellmayer's *How to Establish an Alternative School*, published in 1995 by Corwin Press, addresses concerns such as curriculum options, the importance of school site, and the political realities surrounding start-up programs. Kellmayer, who has years of administrative experience at several alternative schools, also discusses what he considers the 10 key characteristics of effective alternative programs.

At-Risk Youth: Theory, Practice, Reform is a collection of articles by different authors on various facets of at-risk youth. Edited by Robert Kronick, the articles are organized topically and fall under one of the following headings: social, political, and health aspects of at-risk youth; intriguing theories on at-risk youth; students and mothers speak out in their own voices; cultures and ethnic groups that are often ignored; and needed and necessary changes. *At-Risk Youth: Theory, Practice, Reform*, was published in 1997 by Garland Publishing.

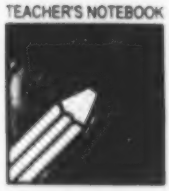
THE SEPTEMBER 1994 ISSUE OF *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP* on "The New Alternative Schools" may no longer be new, but it still serves as a source of innovative ideas for teachers working with at-risk populations.

From a conversation with a co-principal at a highly regarded public school often considered "alternative" to profiles of programs that are helping troubled teens, the issue is packed with information on classrooms that are making a difference. In addition to features on programs for at-risk students, charter schools and home schools are also discussed.

One article states that despite a lack of "institutional legitimacy," alternative schools can serve as models for any school that seeks innovative change.

Issues of *Educational Leadership* are available for $6 from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1250 N. Pitt Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-1453. Phone orders to 1-800-933-2723, and refer to September 1994/Stock No. 1-94211.

—Samantha Morrisey



IT STARTED ON A FLIGHT FROM SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, TO VICTORIA, B.C., as a casual conversation between a counselor educator and a teacher educator, both assistant professors in the School of Education at Gonzaga University.

Soon, it had turned into a passionate dialogue about the similarities between teachers and counselors. We decided that we have much to learn from each other—that we can learn when to teach in counseling and when to counsel in teaching. We agreed that we could strengthen our positions by engaging in a united effort on the part of our kids. This also involves finding new ways of looking at children labeled "at-risk."

It became apparent that both teachers and counselors need to move away from a damage/pathological model to embrace a challenge model built on assets in the child, family, school, and community. About this time, I felt like I was struck by lightning when I read Bonnie Benard's most eloquent work on resiliency, *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community*. Benard's research documents Emmy Werner's landmark study on resiliency and clearly tells us what makes kids succeed.

My experience, expertise, and interest in counseling have taught me that one has to be flexible and continually look for ways to reach kids defined as "unreachable." We need to see all children as reachable, then find ways to reach them. However, the western education and mental health systems are based on a verbal-linguistic model, which assumes verbal ability and preference. I have long believed that art, music, and movement can be used to reach kids who are not verbal.

Often the children we work with were traumatized at an age when they were pre-verbal and may not have had words for their experiences. However, they may have stored this information as visual images, sounds, or movements and express the experience behaviorally, instead of verbally.

This, of course, fits in beautifully with Howard Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences. Gardner believes there are at least eight intelligences (verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical-rhythmic, kinesthetic-movement, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental).

We need to ask in what ways children are smart, not if they are smart. My experiences counseling children taught me that I need to get smarter. I can't change the past of the kids I work with, but I can affect what happens when I am with them. In that way, I can make a difference. If teachers and counselors and community workers all take the same approach, we can make a significant difference in what happens to our kids.

THE CASUAL CONVERSATION THAT STARTED 30,000 FEET IN SPACE, became a concept which became a dream which became a grant which led to research that helped us to develop a graduate program in education designed specifically for teachers who work with challenging kids. The program accommodates teachers who work full time and who balance many roles and responsibilities. Although called "Teaching At-risk Students," the program is focused on resiliency. Teachers can do a great deal to foster resiliency in their students and to change what happens in our schools.

Today's teachers face a variety of challenges in their classrooms for which they often have limited training and few resources. The dynamics in the classroom are intensified by individual issues each child brings to school. Family violence and child abuse, attention differences, emotional problems, and learning disabilities can greatly interfere with the student's academic and interpersonal performance.

Although teachers are not traditionally trained to deal with the affective needs of students, they are often the first ones a student turns to for help. This can be an overwhelming challenge for the teacher. In many cases, special services and resources are necessary, but there are certain communication and intervention skills a teacher can develop that will help her to communicate effectively with students and their parents, when necessary.

Gonzaga University offers a master's program, with concentration on teaching at-risk students. The program provides the theory, methodology, and resources necessary to support the classroom teacher and foster resiliency in children.

The nature of the program is theory to practice; the graduate students classroom becomes the research lab. The program is currently offered in the greater Spokane area and can be provided in any community in the northwestern United States, Hawaii, and Canada. The core courses include: Human Development and Learning, Teaching Strategies, Curriculum Development, Research and Statistics, and Educational Evaluation and Measurement. The concentration courses include: Teacher as Counselor; Risk and Protective Factors; School, Family, and Community; Issues in Multiculturalism; Intervention Skills in the Classroom; and Managing and Enhancing the Instructional Culture. Coursework encourages active student participation from teachers experienced in K-12 classrooms.

WE HEAR OF VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS ACROSS OUR NATION ON A DAILY BASIS. Within the past 14 months, there have been four student shooting sprees and countless other acts of violence. Schools cannot avoid addressing these issues and universities must take an active role in preparing teachers to work with children at-risk. This graduate program focuses on what the teacher can do to strengthen and support today's youth.

Resource note: For additional reading on resiliency factors, see Bonnie Benard's *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community* (ERIC #ED 335 781), and *Overcoming the Odds* (ERIC #ED 344 979) by Emmy Werner and Ruth S. Smith.

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—Jerri Simms Shepard

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